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PROSPECTS OF A BRITISH-INDIA COMPROMISE ARRANGEMENT

On the 14th of July the Viceroy announced the failure of his recent attempt to form a representative Indian council. At the same time he appealed to the various communities to refrain from mutual recriminations over the outcome of the Simla Conference and announced that he was considering what steps might next be taken.[1] These remarks have been generally interpreted to mean that Lord Wavell is concerned to make at least one more attempt to achieve what he set out to do at the Simla Conference, viz., to associate recognized Indian leaders in some sort of consultative partnership with the present government of India.

British Objectives

Britain's present concern with the war in the East and the lack of a united front between India's two main political parties rules out the possibility of any transfer of full political responsibility to Indian hands at this time. At the same time the Simla Conference and the Viceroy's immediately announced intention of considering further steps are both indicative of the Wavell administration's own continuing interest in achieving an interim British-Indian arrangement and improving the country's general political atmosphere.

The main objectives of the interim government as set forth by Lord Wavell would be to wage the war to a successful conclusion and to lead the country in a program of planned development until such time as important constitutional changes may actually be achieved.[2] A considerable section of Indian opinion has tended to view the Pacific phase of the war as an attempt to restore western imperialism to Southeast Asia and to suspect official plans of economic development as calculated to favor British over Indian interests. Under these circumstances the association of popular Indian leaders with the prosecution of the war and with the reconstruction and industrialization plans now in preparation would contribute towards improving Indo-British relations. Such cooperation would reduce India's present disaffection over continuing financial and military contributions to the war and would aid the administration in maintaining and extending necessary wartime controls. Lord Wavell has made it clear that his administration will pursue these

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1 The Times, London, 16 July
2 FCC: Daily, 26 June-16 July

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two objectives whatever the outcome of his present efforts to enlist Indian cooperation. Nevertheless the Viceroy's public resolve to negotiate with the Indian leaders is a significant move on the part of the British administration to secure a working cooperation with India for the joint pursuit of British and Indian political and economic aspirations.

The Failure of the Simla Conference

While there was some reason to believe that the Viceroy's negotiations at Simla might have succeeded the failure of the Conference was by no means a surprise. Most sections of the Indian press showed only moderate interest in the success of the conference, reflecting the popular feeling that so long as the war lasted the proposed council could exercise little real authority and that its formation might be somewhat premature in view of the uncertain outcome of the British elections.

Influences Favoring Success of the Conference

Since Mr. Gandhi's June 1944 interview with Mr. Gelder, the two immediate demands of Congress Party supporters have been for a "Nationalist Government" and the general release of political prisoners. During the same period internal dissentions within the Muslim League and the party's numerous embarassments in provincial politics, some of which stemmed from the partial resumption of Congress activity, seemed to suggest that the League might not press its Pakistan claims if it were given a generous share in the restoration of responsible provincial governments and in the formation of a generally representative Council at the center.[3] The steady increase in cooperation between the League and the Congress in the Central Legislative Assembly, which in the latest session enabled the two parties to defeat the government on every important issue, also seemed to strengthen the likelihood of more extensive cooperation. Both Congressmen and Leaguers were pointing to their assembly record with satisfaction.[4] About this same time Bhulabhai Desai, the leader of the Congress Party in the Central Legislative Assembly privately submitted his proposal for a reconstituted Council which he claimed had the approval of Liaquat Ali Khan, the Assembly's Muslim League leader. Though Mr. Jinnah was quick to quash the idea that the League was committed to any compromise proposal, editorials favorable to Congress-League cooperation were beginning to appear in the press of both parties, and Liaquat Ali Khan commented that the League was ready

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3 In the Northwest Frontier Province a Muslim League Ministry has been replaced by a Congress Ministry, while in Bengal the Muslim League Ministry has been temporarily suspended.

4 Index to Foreign Publications for March and April

to cooperate with Congress in any arrangement which recognized Muslim League claims to represent the Muslim community.[5] Mr. Gandhi's continued insistence that only the Working Committee could make a decision in behalf of the Congress Party made it seem likely that Mr. Jinnah's statement was simply meant to protect the League's bargaining position.

Indian Attitudes Toward the Conference

Though Wavell's announcement at the time of the calling of the Simla Conference and the release of the Congress Working Committee convinced the general Indian public of his own goodwill, there was a general recognition that so long as the war lasted real responsibility would continue to lie with the British. Numerous Indian papers connected the Simla Conference with the Conservative Party's election campaign and with British concern over American rivalry in the Indian market and over Russia's open support of colonial aspirations at San Francisco.[6] Congress enthusiasm was largely directed to rejoicing over the release of the Working Committee rather than to any eager anticipation over the prospects of the conference. Press reports from the conference itself revealed that, with the possible exception of the Muslim Leaguers, the participating leaders showed more concern that the conference should succeed and greater optimistism about its outcome than was shown by Indian public opinion.[7]

Editorials on the conference in Congress and Muslim League organs tended to canvass the difficulties in the way of accepting the proposals rather than to urge acceptance. Congress editorials elaborated on the inadequacies of the British concessions, the dangers to the Congress Party of being limited to caste Hindu representation, under the Viceroy's caste Hindu-Muslim parity formula, and the difficulties of working a coalition government.[8] Radical Congress and conservative Hindu organs warned against any important concessions to the Muslim League.[9] Muslim League editorials stressed the importance of viewing any proposed arrangement as purely an interim affair, urged that parity between Muslims and caste Hindus was not a sufficient guarantee against Hindu domination and pointed to the dangers of making commitments which might eventually be used as arguments against Pakistan.[10] This moderately optimistic but generally critical atmosphere was favorable to negotiation as between the party leaders but was not one which insisted on the imperative need for compromise.

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5 Index to Foreign Publications for March and April.
6 Hindustan Times and National Call, 22 June
7 New York Times, 26, 27 June; Hindustan Standard, 17 June
8 Hindustan Times, 20-23 June
9 National Call, 19 June
10 Sunday Statesman, 24 June

Muslim League Intransigence

As a generous gesture and as a first step towards further negotiations the Viceroy has assumed the blame for the conference failure himself. It is already apparent, however, that the non-Muslim public in India and much of British press opinion is inclined to blame Mr. Jinnah's intransigence for the failure.[11] Mr. Jinnah, who has once again carried the Working Committee of the League with him and whose influence still seems to be on the increase in Muslim political circles, refused to accept the Viceroy's proposed list of men for the reorganized Council. This list was not made public but it apparently included a Muslim who was neither a member of the Muslim League nor of the Congress Party (possibly Khizr Hyat Khan, the premier of the Punjab, who last year refused Mr. Jinnah's request to disband the province's Unionist party in favor of an exclusively Muslim League organization.)

After rejecting the Viceroy's proposals, Mr. Jinnah made public the Muslim League's demands for 50 percent membership in any interim council and for all Muslim members to be selected by the League.[12] At the same time the League Working Committee passed a resolution calling for fresh elections to the central and provincial legislatures.[13] These moves suggest that Mr. Jinnah has succeeded in convincing the League leaders that their acceptance of the Viceroy's compromise proposals would be premature and that League strength in the provinces is much greater than its representation in the legislatures would suggest. In this connection it seems worth pointing out that at Simla Mr. Jinnah had several conferences with the Muslim premiers of Assam and Sind and that not so long ago he took public notice of the universal Muslim League successes in recent provincial by-elections.[14]

Muslim League Bargaining Strength

Apart from its size and importance in the Muslim community, the League derives much of its bargaining strength both from British reluctance to coerce an important minority as well as from the Congress Party's desire for a united India. The British have undoubtedly strengthened the League's present intransigent position by recognizing the possibility of provincial secession in the Cripps proposals and by the recent terms of reference at Simla where the formation of the council was made to depend upon the agreement of all the parties invited. At the same time such Muslim League-Congress negotiations as the Gandhi-Jinnah talks of last year and the Desai-Liaquat formula of this are

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11 FCC: Daily, 14 July; The Times, London, 16 July
12 FCC: Daily, 16 July
13 Ibid.
14 FCC: Daily, 7 July; OSS Source S

important indications of the League's readiness to press its Pakistan demands to get concessions directly from the Congress on the basis of the latter's desire for a united India and for the revival of its political activities under a reconstituted Viceroy's Council. As long as the League retains its present prominence in the Muslim Community it will be difficult to by-pass.

Conclusion: Present Prospects for a Compromise Arrangement

After the failure of the Simla Conference, the success of any future British attempt to achieve a compromise arrangement in India would appear to depend not only on the British reducing their support for the League's most extreme claims but also on the Congress acceding to an almost equal division of power with the League during the interim period. The trend of British press opinion in recent months, Lord Wavell's continued interest in compromise despite the failure of the Simla Conference and the recent Labor victory at the polls, all augur in favor of the British making further attempts to satisfy Indian demands as far as may be compatible with war requirements. The Simla Conference has opened the way for such an attempt by clarifying British and Indian objectives in a compromise arrangement and by demonstrating the difficulties that will have to be hurdled. It is clear that the British do not contemplate any great constitutional change in war time. This was made evident even in the Labor Party's campaign statements, though the suggestion that Indian affairs be transferred to the Foreign Office was made as a token of that party's genuine concern to forward Indian aspirations. In the interest of influencing the government's wartime decisions, Indian leaders appear ready to accept the partial assumption of responsibility in a reconstituted Viceroy's council, but only on condition that their party's political goals are not compromised. The Congress Party is concerned to maintain its generally representative character and the Muslim League to retain its bargaining position based on Pakistan claims. It is unlikely that the trial of strength between the Congress and Moslem leaders will reach a decisive point at which agreements might be made until after general Indian elections have been held.